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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents the program transcripts of a weekly series "Options in Education", broadcast by National Public Radio. The topic under discussion in this program is food in the schools. The options of nutritionists, professionals, and administrators concerning food programs in schools in New York City are presented. Among the topics addressed are: the history of the federal food program, the environment in which children eat, the relationship of food programs to scholastic achievement, and current controversies surrounding federal food programs. (Author/AM)

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OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

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Program #76

FOOD IN THE SCHOOLS
PART II

May 2, 1977

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FOOD IN THE SCHOOLS

PART II

MERROW: It's 7:30 in the morning in Brooklyn, New York. I'm John Merrow, and this is OPTIONS IN EDUCATION. This week on OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, it's time for school food. I'm on my way now to breakfast at an elementary school in the middle of the housing projects in Brooklyn.

(Commercial: "Cheerios")

JEAN MAYER: Small children, as Bruno Bettelheim, for instance, has shown, the quality of the food, and the way in which they are fed has a great deal to with the attitude of the school itself. The fact that they are served very impersonal meals, that they don't know the people who prepared the food, all this gives them a feeling of a sort of society which really doesn't care very much for them, and sort of depersonalizes.

BLAIR: Nutritionist Jean Mayer. I'm Wendy Blair. Right now, we're going to talk about the food American children get in school. My Co-Host, John Merrow, went to Brooklyn, Harlem, Spanish Harlem and Chinatown to find out what kind of food children are getting there.

MERROW: The line is coming through now, and every kid is picking his cereal. You picked Rice Krispies, Rice Krispies. Okay, now it's breakfast time. What are you having?

STUDENT: I'm having Super Sugar Crisp.

MERROW: And what do you have?

STUDENT: Rice Krispies.

MERROW: You're the only one with Super Sugar Crisp. Haven't you heard that sugar is bad for you?

STUDENT: Yeah.

MERROW: But you're having them anyway.

STUDENT: Yeah.

MERROW: Okay. Go ahead. Sit down and have your breakfast. There's another item on the tray that I didn't notice. In addition to the cereal, the milk, there's a little white cup - and in the little white cup? Sugar. Do you keep an eye to make sure that people don't take more than one cereal or more than one milk?

CAFETERIA WORKER: She watches out for the cereal, and the milk? They can have more than one milk if they want.

MERROW: As the kids finish breakfast, they bring their trays over here, over to this cart, and there are two pails and four trash cans. What the kids do is they pour their milk and juice and left-over cereal into the pails, and then drop the paper trash into the garbage cans, and then stack the cardboard trays. So, these pails are rapidly filling up. Each kid seems to have about a third to a half of a container of milk to throw away. You didn't eat very much of your cereal?

STUDENT: No.

MERROW: Weren't your hungry?

STUDENT: No.

MERROW: You poured away a lot of your milk. How come you didn't drink your milk?

STUDENT: I don't know.

MERROW: You drank your juice though, didn't you?

STUDENT: Yeah.

MERROW: How old are you?

STUDENT: Seven.

BLAIR: We'll go back to that school cafeteria in a few minutes. Meanwhile, John, what was your overall impression of those schools you visited?

MERROW: Well, Wendy, I had one good meal all week, and I caught a cold at the same time. But we did want to go into the inner city to find out what was the impact of the Federal programs that are designed to bring food to the neediest areas, to the neediest schools. And, as you'll hear, there are a lot of problems.

BLAIR: John, what is so grim about it?

MERROW: Well, I don't think I want to give it away. I remember when I was in school we had a kitchen and cooks to serve lunch. Today, there's a trend towards something called "Meal Packs" - which are a kind of TV dinner.

BLAIR: I know. In fact, more and more schools seem to be consolidating their cooking facilities. They use corporate kitchens and they ship frozen TV dinner-like meals to be warmed up at individual schools. About half a million children get these "Meal Packs."

MERROW: But do they eat them? There is a problem of plate waste, which is the food children throw away. Last week we learned that over $4 billion a year is spent on breakfast and lunch programs for America's school children, but about $600 million worth of that food is thrown away. In addition, some parents question the nutritional value of the food that's served.

BLAIR: It's often sugar-coated breakfast cereals, or for lunch reconstituted mashed potatoes and meat with fillers added.

MERROW: If the food isn't nutritious, and it's being thrown away to the tune of millions of dollars, and it's such a strain on schools that they're turning over food contracts to big corporations, like ITT, maybe schools should not be in the food business.

BLAIR: But that just isn't realistic. Children do have to eat, and students can't study if they're hungry.

MERROW: And, besides, there's a lot of money involved for farmers and corporations that supply some of the meals, and there are many special interest groups concerned with the welfare of economically deprived students.

BLAIR: Before we go any further, NPR's David Ensor is here with me in the studio with a report on why the government decided to get into the food service business in the first place. David?

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FEDERAL FOOD PROGRAMS

DAVID ENSOR: Well, right after the Second World War, the U.S. found that it had huge surpluses of a lot of types of food. Our farms began to produce more than the commercial market would bear. Yet, there were still people in this country who were hungry. And a lot of kids growing up hungry. So, the government began buying food surpluses to keep the prices up. And in 1946, the Congress started the National School Lunch Program to help end the hunger - and it's plenty.

That program has grown to where last year 26 million school children were served lunch at school. 80% of the nation's schools take part.

BLAIR: What does it cost?

ENSOR: Well, the Federal share of the cost is now well over the billion dollar mark - not counting the surplus commodities they pass out. Poor children can get their school lunch free. The Department of Agriculture pays for that. And kids from a family of four making less than $11,000 a year can get lunch for less, usually just 20c. The average price to others is 54c. The Federal government also gives equipment like ovens and freezers to schools in poor areas. And, of course, there are those half pints of milk that everybody probably remembers from school. Those are cheap to all kids and free to the poorer ones.

BLAIR: David, what about the School Breakfast Program? Can any school have one?

ENSOR: Well, the School Breakfast Program is relatively new, and it was mandated in 1966, and last year only served 2.3 million children. Any school can have one, and it was started with the idea that a lot of kids don't get much out of school all morning because they're hungry, and they didn't get breakfast at home. Many school principals don't want to start serving breakfast, though, because they say it will mess up the school timetables, and that kind of thing.

BLAIR: What about other programs - food programs in the schools?

ENSOR: Well, there are several others besides lunch and breakfast programs. For example, for two summers now there's been a Summer Food Program for children in poor areas. Last summer, 2.5 million kids got meals from it, but some of the private, supposedly non-profit sponsors in the program in New York City were charged with cheating in various ways. And this year, the Agriculture Department is cutting that one back, and watching it fairly closely.

Finally, for two years now, there's been a small program extending the same deals school get, under the School Lunch Program, to certain non-profit daycare centers and Headstart programs and the like. Again, it's aimed at needy children.

BLAIR: Thanks, David. We'll hear more from David Ensor later in the program. But now, it's breakfast time at P.S. 287 in Brooklyn.

MERROW: I noticed at breakfast that there were an awful lot of things thrown away.

CAFETERIA WORKER: You know how the children are. A lot of them waste it. A majority of them eat it. A majority do. A majority come back and they want doubles.

MERROW: Can they get doubles?

CAFETERIA WORKER: Well, if I've finished with all the serving, and I have some over, I do give them their double. Yes, I do

MERROW: I never did find out your name.

CAFETERIA WORKER: Jean Mielsi.

MERROW: Jean Mielsi, well, thank you very much for this tour of the kitchen.

CAFETERIA WORKER: Thank you for the interview. Thank you.

MERROW: What did you have for breakfast this morning?

STUDENT: I didn't want nothin' for breakfast.

MERROW: So, what did you do?

STUDENT: Just some candy.

MERROW: You got candy for breakfast this morning. What kind of candy did you get?

STUDENT: Apple stick and three sour apple lollipop.

MERROW: Where did you get the candy?

STUDENT: From the store.

MERROW: Did you have any breakfast this morning?

STUDENT: No.

MERROW: Well, now, here's the inspector who comes around and checks on breakfast programs who happened to come to this one this morning, and he sat and watched the kids eat breakfast and watched the whole thing in operation. Let's find out whether it passed inspection. What can you say?

INSPECTOR: Yes, it really seemed to be all right. The school seems to pass inspection. They've got a few minor problems in there, but the program is new. So, they're going to have a couple of problems until we can iron them out.

MERROW: The program is six years old.

INSPECTOR: The breakfast program isn't six years old. Is it?

MERROW: The food program is six years old, and the breakfast program is four years old, I think.

INSPECTOR: Yeah, but like this is the first year for me to start.

MERROW: You say there are a few minor problems. What did you spot?

INSPECTOR: A few problems here and there. The way they serve the juices - like, they put them out on the table, and, you know, she takes the juice count, which she should take like a tray count. I mean, it would be more accurate than a juice count.

MERROW: The program - to expect 250, but there certainly weren't 250 children here this morning.

INSPECTOR: Right. Well, they said on some days, on certain days, like on hot days or when the breakfast is, you know, especially good - like French Toast, or something like that, 250 kids will show up. And then some days, when the breakfast is kind of, you know, on the down side of it, like as far as oatmeal. A lot of the

kids don't like to eat [illegible], you know. Then there would be very few kids coming in.

MERROW: Does this school have French Toast and cereal sometimes?

INSPECTOR: Yes. This program does, yes.

MERROW: I was under the impression that all they had here for breakfast was cold cereal.

INSPECTOR: Cold cereal? No. Mmm-mm. This is not what I heard. I didn't hear nothin' of it yet. But I'm going to ask about it.

MERROW: Did they tell you that they do serve French Toast and oatmeal for breakfast?

INSPECTOR: No. They didn't really say that. They stated that they serve hot breakfasts - but I have a list of all the things that the schools be serving. On the paper it states, you know, eggs, you know, cereal, oatmeal, you know, French Toast and stuff like this.

MERROW: We must be getting our information from different sources because I understood that they only serve cold cereal here.

INSPECTOR: No. I can't understand that. I'll have to check with the Senior School Lunch Official.

MERROW: Let's go check and find out if they ever serve a hot breakfast here.

INSPECTOR: What do you do on the cold days?

CAFETERIA WORKER: Well, we usually serve hot chocolate.

INSPECTOR: No oatmeal?

CAFETERIA WORKER: No.

INSPECTOR: I'll have to see what we can do about that.

MERROW: But it is - it is cold cereal every morning.

CAFETERIA WORKER: It is cold cereal, right.

MERROW: This is Alan Boyce who's the Principal of P.S. 287. Mr. Boyce, you have three different kinds of cereal this morning - Rice Krispies, and then two sugar-coated cereals. I noticed that the Rice Krispies were the most popular of those three. Why not get rid of the sugar-covered cereals?

BOYCE: Well, it seems like the sugar-covered cereals are the most popular cereals. The children like it better, and . . . .

I know that. But the point is they also get the milk. They also get the fruit, and it's something you really have to settle for. It's a matter of a compromise.

MERROW: Kids don't necessarily take what their bodies need. They also take what they're conditioned to by television, by the society in general. So, they do take a lot of sugar. You have a lot of kids here this morning who weren't eating breakfast, but had their pockets full of candy.

That is true. I think our breakfasts are more nutritious than the candy. I hope it is, anyway.

MERROW: Well, breakfast is over now at P.S. 287. Maybe 210 kids had breakfast here this morning with a choice of Rice Krispies, Sugar Pops and Sugar-Covered Corn Flakes, glass of apple juice, and a half pint of milk. There's a lot of waste, but, by the same token, a lot of kids had breakfast who might otherwise not have had anything to eat at all this morning.

BLAIR: Before he went to lunch in Spanish Harlem, John talked with Alice Macaderny, attorney with the Food Law Project, part of a public interest legal service in New York City.

ALICE MACADERNY

MACADERNY: Well, parents know that kids hate the lunches and breakfasts. The kids come home hungry. They say, "I threw it away, Ma." And the mother says, "Well, I'm not going to let you buy it anymore. I'm not going to let you participate in the program anymore." Well, they know that the kids are getting Sugar-Frosted Flakes, and what do the parents do about it? Nothing! I mean, they don't understand that local parents can control their School Board. You elect the School Board. The School Board has control over the School Food Service people who run the program. And the parents are not concerned enough to make sure that their children are properly fed at school.

MERROW: What they are concerned enough to do, I suspect, is feed their kids at home. They say, "Well, I don't want my kid eating that sugar stuff." Am I right?

MACADERNY: Maybe they do feed their kids at home, but the kids have an option to eat at school, and in many instances neither parent is home at lunch. And I think it's going to be a crazy system if we're gonna, you know, send all the kids home at lunch because they're is no one there with food to feed them. I mean, the object should be to make the programs run properly, and local parents have control. They should realize that they have the power to make these programs run right. And if they don't care to do that, then it's their own fault. In New York City schools, apparently, there's a lot of problem with palatability. And that has to do with the fact that about a third of the schools is supplied by these "Meal Pack" places, which is just frozen garbage. It's awful! Smells awful and tastes awful! And who would eat it? And, you know, the USDA has done studies on plate waste. And, again, you know, if you're gonna allow the big companies to make the food in Illinois, and freeze it and ship it to New York, and feed your children, well, then, that's your problem. No wonder the kids don't like it. I mean, people eat. People need to eat to live, and they eat what is most palatable to them. If you see scrambled eggs mushed up in a paper cup, you know, that smell like rubber, you're not going to eat it. No matter how hungry you are.

MERROW: Alice Macaderny, a Staff Attorney with the Food Law Project in New York City.

BLAIR: Even though the law says that all children may participate, the breakfast program hasn't been able to escape the stigma of being labeled a welfare program for the poor. James Hill directs the School Breakfast Committee, a New York City citizens group. He believes that since the Federal government will pay schools almost 50¢ per breakfast served, that every school ought to have a program. In fact, starting in September, New York schools will be required by law to provide breakfast, but critics say that breakfast should be a time for the family to be together.

JAMES HILL

MERROW: Isn't breakfast at home, you know, with the mother and father, isn't that really part of what? The American Way?

HILL: Yeah. That's what they say. In fact, you hear from all sorts - like you get some of the Blacks, new class of folks, they say, "Hey, it's breaking up the Black family structure." You know, the fact that Black kids are leaving their homes to eat their breakfast . . . but if you really look at the situation, you find that there are a lot of working mothers, and they really don't have the time to eat breakfast with their family, because they have to get out there and work, and I think people know the reason why. And, as a former teacher, you actually know who has had a breakfast in the morning, and who hasn't. I mean, it's so obvious to anyone that knows anything about teaching. You can just see it in the kid's performance. They try to say that it's not in the Black family's lifestyle to eat breakfast on one level, and then they say, "It's breaking up the Black family to eat breakfast," and then they say, "The white family - everyone eats breakfast together." I mean, there are so many stereotypes and there's so much baloney about . . . I mean, people aren't really the same. They're different. I mean, they have different habits, and some kids eat better in camp, you know, because they're eating with a group, and some people love eating with groups. Some people like eating by themselves. And, you see, the key issue about the breakfast program is it's optional. The kids are not mandated to go and eat the breakfast.

MERROW: You say "optional" - but it's not optional for schools, or it won't be in New York State fairly soon.

HILL: Right. It's not optional for schools, but it's optional for kids. And that's the important fact because, you know, I don't think that you should force the kids to eat the breakfast in school, if they don't like to eat the particular breakfast in the school, you know. But I think that with the mandated situation, as long as you can mandate the breakfast to the schools, then you can somewhat erase the racist stigmatism that goes on the poor people eating the breakfast - because, if you look at the people it's supposed to affect the most, you say, "Well, those Black people - they need a welfare this, and they need the welfare food, and stuff," and it's such a stigma that this breakfast program is just for poor kids. It's not true. The breakfast program is for all kids.

MERROW: James Hill, who's Director of the New York City School Breakfast Committee.

BLAIR: James Hill says that the school has to serve between 50 and 100 breakfasts a day to break even. But since so few children show up for breakfast in some schools, the schools lose money, and lose interest in offering breakfast programs. Now, it's time for lunch at P.S. 192 in Spanish Harlem.

MERROW: Just to give you some idea of the noise level in the lunchroom, just listen for a few seconds. Now, as always, I have a crowd of kids around me, but it's nothing out of the ordinary in noise level, and I've now got about 25 kids and the number is doubling every 15 seconds. Tell me what you had for lunch.

STUDENT: Frankfurter. French fries. Milk. Peaches.

MERROW: So, was it a good lunch?

STUDENT: Mmm-mm.

MERROW: What did you have yesterday?

STUDENT: We had pizza, chocolate milk . . .

MERROW: Well, this is not exactly to my liking, but right now I'm checking through the garbage in the lunch here, and here's a little tin tray that has all its french fries in it. Here's another tin tray with all its french fries. Here's one with all the french fries and almost all the hot dog. Floor has a pool of milk, which is about eight feet long and four feet wide. That's some of the left-over milk. There

are ten full garbage bags, and twenty-one boxes of garbage. Most of it's just plain garbage. Most of it's empty milk cartons, and empty tin trays and empty cups, but there are lots of french fries here. So much for digging through garbage, and now it's time for me to go have my Type A lunch. Are you giving us anything special?

CAFETERIA WORKER: No. It's exactly what the kids eat.

MERROW: That's what you call a Type A lunch?

CAFETERIA WORKER: The Type A lunch - with the fruit, the vegetable, the two ounces of meat, the bread and the milk.

MERROW: Thank you very much. Now, Mr. Rodriguez, you're the Principal at P.S. 192, and you just told me that you really don't care for the Meal Pack the way it is. The kids like the hot dog, but they don't eat the french fries. The french fries are squishy, and the meals not attractive. The kids don't pay much attention. It ends up on the floor, and in the waste baskets over there. If you had your druthers, if you could have it the way you wanted it, what would you have served for lunch?

RODRIGUEZ: Okay. First of all, I would have them have a choice of lunch. I would like to have a kitchen where the lunch is prepared right here on the premises. I would like them to have the same type of lunch they would have at home. They eat hamburgers and frankfurters, yes. But they also eat rice. They also eat beans. They also eat plantains, juice. They also, you know, tomatoes in a salad. We have in the last ten years, we have had a number of companies preparing food for schools, all right? And they have very neat packages, and the food is nutritious, but it is unattractive to children. So, in the final analysis, we have a lunch dispensation business. Not a nutrition program for children because the children won't eat the lunch.

MERROW: That's that old dilemma. Do you give the children what they want to eat, or what they need to eat?

RODRIGUEZ: You give them what they want to eat - not what they need to eat. Lunch here is only a small portion of what the children eat. And it's contrary to their belief. I hear - even my teachers - who are saying, "This is the only decent food the child has." And that's a misconception. In fact, that's a kind of discriminatory and racist way of looking at things.

MERROW: Alejandro Rodriguez who's Principal of P.S. 192 in New York City. I just finished my Type A lunch, and I begin to understand why there's plate waste. My luncheon companion ate none of her roll, maybe two french fries, and about half a hot dog. She drank a third of her milk, and ate none of the peaches. So much for plate waste! As for me, I'm not quite as guilty as she is. I drank all my milk. I ate all my peaches, and I even ate the hot dog. I didn't touch the white bread processed thing that's disguised as a hot dog roll, and I just took one look at the french fries and tested them with my "spork" - which is a spoon/fork combination - and found that they were soft and squishy to the touch, and those are going in the trash as well. So, about the most attractive thing I can say about this little lunch that we've been given is the cover - the tin foil cover which has one of those happy smiling faces on it - but I'd wager to say that there weren't very many happy, smiling faces on the kids when they took off the tin cover and looked at the mush that was underneath.

STUDENT: Let me say something? Hello. (Lots of kids screaming at the top of their lungs: "Goodbye!")

BLAIR: That chaotic lunchroom, and the Meal Pack lunch, can't be teaching those children much about food, nutrition or table manners. Nutrition education was one part of the justification for the program in the first place, remember. Dr. Jean Mayer, the President of Tufts University in Boston, and a well-known nutritionist, talked with John recently about the environment in which children eat.

DR. JEAN MAYER

MERROW: Dr. Mayer, if the appearance of food is important, and it certainly is, what must children learn from the meals that they get at lunch? The Meal Pack? You know, which is a glorified and . . . not even a glorified . . . TV dinner that comes covered with aluminum foil, and it's just heated up in an oven. It has no odor, and you can't even see it.

MAYER: Well, again, this is not the general rule for school lunches in the United States. There are problems in that a lot of older schools, particularly in urban areas, which have no kitchen facilities, and where it's difficult to install a kitchen. Let me point out that this is not necessarily a bad meal. This is the sort of meal that is served on airplanes.

MERROW: Oh, let me argue with you about that. They're just terrible.

MAYER: No. Wait. The preparation of dishes of that sort, that mode of preparation, is by no means incompatible with having good meals because certainly on the first class of airlines you get meals which are prepared exactly that way, and are by and large quite palatable. What you may well ask is, "Where is the ethics of a society which will serve $6.00 and $7.00 meals to, by and large, over-weight businessmen traveling on airplanes 30,000 feet up, and then wants to serve meals which are worth 65¢ at the most to its children?

MERROW: Answer your own question.

MAYER: Well, that type of preparation again is perfectly compatible with decent meals, but it's going to cost money in order to have these meals. And the question is - What are we going to put our money in? And I think that of all the ridiculous ways in which to save money to spend that little money on the feeding of children is ridiculous. Most states, as a matter of fact, you can make a comparison between the meal allowance for the legislature, which is usually the highest, the meals served in the National Guard, the meals served in the prisons, and the meals served to the children. And the children are absolutely at the bottom of the heap by a long, long shot, and the only people on whom less monies is usually spent than the children are those unfortunate fellow citizens of ours who are in mental asylum , and who in some states are almost starved. But the fact of the matter is you cannot expect that you'll get decent meals these days when you spend 50¢ or 60¢ per child, which is what a lot of school lunches actually cost.

MERROW: But it's not simply a question of more money? That wouldn't solve it to just put more money in the meals. I mean, you'd have to change some attitudes about length of time given for eating and facilities as well, no?

MAYER: It's not simply a question of money, but when you talk about the quality of a meal, and how it's going to taste, the tie with money is extremely high. The attitudes are certainly extremely important. The facilities are important. The type of supervision is important.

MERROW: Can you generalize? What do kids learn from the way they're treated or fed in schools?

MAYER: I think it's extremely important in small children - as Bruno Bettelheim, for instance, has shown - the quality of the food and the way that they are fed has a great deal to do with the attitude toward the school itself. The fact that they are served very impersonal meals, that they are not even usually taken through the kitchen. They don't know the people who prepare the food; that they are very often supervised by school lunch supervisors who are different from the people who teach them -- all this gives them a feeling of a sort of a society which really doesn't care very much for them, and is sort of depersonalized, and they don't develop the warm feeling toward school that they would if they knew the person who cooked the meal, had seen the meals being cooked, and if they eat with their teacher. So, what we're talking about is better food, served in better conditions, with meals which are made to be a social as well as a nutritional experience, and foods which are used as a basis for teaching nutrition education, and separating foods from nutrition is a sure way of making the teaching completely ineffectual.

BLAIR: Nutrition expert Dr. Jean Mayer, the President of Tufts University in Boston.

MERROW: Dr. Mayer was right about the number of Meal Packs. Of the 26 million meals served each day in schools, only about half a million are the pre-cooked Meal Pack variety.

BLAIR: The big companies, like IT&T, SCM - that's Smith-Corono Marchant Company - and Mass Feeding, a subsidiary of the Jewell Tea Company, have made inroads in the Meal Pack business in the big cities. Collectively, they sold between $55-$60 million of those frozen, pre-plated meals last year alone. Those companies refused to tell us their individual sales, though. Now, let's go to Chinatown in New York City.

MERROW: The gymnasium at P.S. 130 in Lower Manhattan, down near Canal Street, in Chinatown, is being transformed into a cafeteria. The portable tables are being unfolded. There are four posters that I can see, from where I'm standing. One says, "Peanut Butter is Low." Another one says something about growth and vitamins. And one says something about "Bringing Money for Yummies." And the last one says, "Exit." So, it's time for breakfast. Here come the kids. What did you have this morning to eat? Anything?

STUDENT. I know how to say it in Chinese, but not English.

MERROW: Say it in Chinese.

STUDENT: Mac Ti.

MERROW: Ten minutes ago, everyone was standing very quietly in line waiting. Now you can hear the noise level in the room has gone up. And what's interesting is the kids aren't crowded. They're not packed together. The room's big enough to allow kids to sit down with their friends. And, so, there's all a kind of bright chatter - not the noise level of that tiny, little lunchroom with hundreds of kids crowded in. Here there are 150 kids maybe. There's space for many, many more. Little clusters of kids, enjoying themselves. A lot of the kids are eating the cereal dry, and drinking their milk. I guess it's as good a way as any. This is one of those handy boxes that you can make into a bowl.

STUDENT: You have to open it over here like this, right? And then you pour the milk in and you can eat it in this. Some put inside the milk.

MERROW: I've just opened my Apple Jacks, and this is non-commercial radio, but I guess I will give you an anti-commercial. They're pink and look like big cheerios.

They're pink and you can see the sugar, and the little pieces of apple on them. And they taste like nothing. I just opened up my cereal box, and made it into a little bowl and put the milk in, and Apple Jacks with milk aren't all that bad. I was wrong about there only being Apple Jacks. There's another cereal . . . Sugar Pops! Breakfast is just about over. The kids are filing up, putting their trash away. And then getting into lines and filing on up the stairs. The teachers are here to take them. Guiding them out. It's getting quieter by the second.

CAFETERIA WORKER: I'm working on lunch. I'm off breakfast. But my girls are on breakfast, and they're doing the tables, and the cleaning-up.

MERROW: You're working on lunch right now. And those trays . . . .

CAFETERIA WORKER: There's catchup, a spork and a straw. And they're going to have hamburger with french fries, an apple and milk.

MERROW: Well, back in the kitchen. There are boxes piled in the corner. Let's see. Give me a reading of the different kinds of cereals.

CAFETERIA WORKER: Fruit Loops, Rice Krispies, Frosted Flakes, Sugar Sparkles - let's see now - Sugar Crisp, Frosted Rice, Bran Flakes, Cocoa Crisp, Toasties Corn Flakes. I think we have all of them.

MERROW: The only one I see that doesn't seem to be sugar-covered is the 40% Bran Flakes.

CAFETERIA WORKER: Bran Flakes. Right. There's only one class that really - the little ones - the teacher likes unsweeted . . . .

MERROW: How about the kids?

CAFETERIA WORKER: They enjoy it. They like it.

MERROW: You say you're not going to order any more Bran Flakes.

CAFETERIA WORKER: Well, we cut it down for a while, you know.

MERROW: And a couple of boxes of cookies here. Do they get cookies?

CAFETERIA WORKER: Cookies they get once a week, on a Wednesday.

MERROW: That's the breakfast, just a kind of a treat to go with breakfast?

CAFETERIA WORKER: No. Because they don't have the hot breakfast. So, they give them a cookie instead.

MERROW: Who decides on the menu?

CAFETERIA WORKER: District Office II.

MERROW: And they really just send you what they're giving out.

CAFETERIA WORKER: . . . the truck driver brings and sometimes they change it if you know, what would you say, the cost of everything - sometimes it's a higher cost, and they cut it to something that's a little less expensive.

MERROW: Now it's time for the cooks to have breakfast, and guess what? They're not going to have Apple Jacks. They just put a couple of corn muffins and an English muffin in the grill and we're all going to sit down and have coffee. They get a 10-minute break and then it's back to work.

BLAIR: In all, more than 26 million meals are served every day in schools. What effect, if any, is the food having on the performance of the school children receiving free and reduced priced lunches? Dr. Ernesto Pollitt is Professor of Growth and Development at M.I.T., and he says that there just isn't enough evidence about this.

DR. ERNESTO POLLITT

POLLITT: You really cannot say that a child has a well-balanced breakfast versus another child who eats coke and a candy bar at 8:00 in the morning - that both children are going to have different behaviors at noontime. There's no way actually to demonstrate that. At least, there's no way that you can actually conclude that because the data is just not there. School feeding programs have social merit. At the same time they definitely have nutritional merit, and health merit. They can serve - that's the word I used before - as a form of immunization so that the childrer can grow and develop as healthy organisms. But it's a different thing altogether to claim that on the basis of that token, you are going to improve the cognitive or the mental capacity of the recipients. I don't think - and I think it's simplistic to assume that nutrition alone is a factor that limits the educational productivity of many children in this country. Nutrition is only one of a number of factors. Nutrition is just one of a cluster of adverse factors in the life of many children in the low income strata. And only because we introduce better nutrition, we cannot expect that they're really going to improve in educational output.

MERROW: Dr. Ernesto Pollitt, Professor of Growth and Development at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

BLAIR: Dr. Pollitt says that whatever the evidence the food program is necessary and valuable. It immunizes poor children, he says. It's a kind of health insurance. Dr. Joan Gussow, the Head of the Program in Nutrition, Teachers' College, Columbia University in New York, agrees with Dr. Pollitt.

MERROW: Dr. Gussow spoke with NPR Reporter Bill Toohey.

DR. JOAN GUSSOW

GUSSOW: In about 1965, someone did a study of the nutritional status of school children on the Lower East Side. The children were a mixture, I believe, of Chinese, Puerto Rican and Black, and they found some malnutrition, some retarded growth, some low levels of certain vitamins. The last study that had been done of school children in the City of New York had been done around 1935, something like that, when the Lower East Side population was largely Jewish. They found quite a bit of malnutrition, according to the standards of that day, quite a bit of low nutrient levels. Now, those kids grew up to be - I don't know where he was born - but I mean Bella Abzug, Jack Javits, right? Those were the kids who went on to City College and became the big achievers. Why? Because the meaning of being hungry, or the meaning of being malnourished and its impact on you has a great deal to do with #1, during the Depression, everybody was having problems. So, it wasn't a disgrace not to have enough money. It wasn't a disgrace to be poor. The rich people were poor. And you had a cultural thrust among the Jewish population which put a very high premium on learning. So, you don't find "the decrement in learning" that you would then ascribe to malnutrition, if you found it now. I don't think you can separate food from a whole - and nutritional status from a whole set of other cultural things. To be poor now, to be malnourished now, to be a member of a minority now, a discriminated against minority, is a handicap, and it's terribly hard to sort out that handicap from the handicap represented by marginal nutritional status.

TOOHEY: Dr. Gussow, from what you've said, then, I gather that the push to end hunger

among American school children should be based more on just concepts of social justice rather than science. Is that right?

GUSSOW: Absolutely. I would not argue that hunger has no effect. But I would argue that it is ridiculous to say that we have to prove that serving kids a decent lunch or a decent breakfast in school will raise their IQ by ten points or change their grade point average in order to justify doing it. We should not have hungry children in the richest country in the world.

TOOHEY: We're putting too much of a burden on food, if we do it that way, aren't we? If we say that food will make them better students?

GUSSOW: That's right. What it is is what we've always done. It's a cheap excuse for making social changes.

TOOHEY: Thank you very much, Doctor. I've been speaking with Dr. Joan Gussow, Chairperson of the Program in Nutrition, Teachers' College, Columbia University. For OPTIONS IN EDUCATION, this is Bill Toohey in New York.

BLAIR: There's another whole side to the school food story, and that's here in Washington. It doesn't involve Sloppy Joes or pale green cafeterias. What's at stake here is millions of dollars, and there are lobby groups of all different persuasions. The Child Nutrition Programs involve big money and big business. The total cost of the School Lunch Program alone, for example, is $4 billion a year. So, the politics around child nutrition are quite lively. There have been some disturbing studies a scandal or two, and all kinds of pressure for change. David Ensor has been following these food programs for several years now, and he's here with a report.

DAVID ENSOR ON CURRENT CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING FEDERAL FOOD PROGRAMS

ENSOR: Every few years, a few of the programs come up before the Congress for what's called "reauthorization" - that means, the legislators have to extend them or improve them/extend them, or drop them. This year, it's the turn of the commodities and the Summer Food Programs, the most unusual and scandal-ridden of the Child Nutrition Programs. The Commodities Program hands out to schools about $500 million worth of surplus food, bought by the government from farmers. That amounts to 11 1/2¢ per meal. It's mostly beef, pork, chicken, canned and frozen vegetables, dry milk, that kind of thing - whatever is surplus. It's funded in a very unusual way. In their wisdom, the School Lunch Program's congressional inventors arranged it so that every year a third of the Treasury Department's revenue from customs goes to the Department of Agriculture to buy surplus food for children. That way the funds to buy the food don't have to pass congressional scrutiny every year. The Customs money goes to USDA automatically.

Farmers love it! So do most schools, but some of the big institutional food wholesalers aren't so keen. They call it "backdoor spending" and say it's depriving them of markets. You can expect to see the Commodities Program continued this year, but not without some lively debates. Then, there's the Summer Food Program. It's up for reauthorization this year, too. In New York City, last summer, the program was a disaster. Representative Elizabeth Holtzman of Brooklyn did a study of it. I asked her what she found.

REPRESENTATIVE HOLTZMAN: We found youngsters and adults coming to sites and carting food away by the shopping bag full, and sometimes several shopping bags full of food were taken away. Even though the program was supposed to distribute one meal to each child. Then, we also found food littered all over the street. There was so much food and not enough children really to eat it. We found food that was served in frozen state. We found food that was left out on the street for days in the sun. Milk,

especially, before it was served to the children, almost none of the vendors had even had health inspections for three weeks and were operating the program. And it was clear that this very badly run program had victimized the children.

ENSOR: Holtzman says that she found collusion between the supposedly "good guy" - day camp, charities and churches that were sponsoring Summer Food for Kids - and the for-profit vendors they got the food from. Both make money on each meal served. And in one instance, for example, 16,000 low-grade sandwiches were dumped in a schoolyard each day where only 20 children were actually eating lunch. The Summer Food Program in New York will be run by new people this year. Many of last year's sponsors and vendors have been kicked out. The number of health inspections will be up. But Holtzman and others want only a one-year extension for the Program, and if it doesn't go well this summer, they want it stopped altogether.

Another constant issue is plate waste. According to the Department of Agriculture, itself, $600 million worth of food is thrown away each year in school cafeterias and lunchrooms. But a recent study done by The Chicago Tribune suggests that figure may be conservative. USDA says about a third of fruits and vegetables served get dumped by students. The Tribune study found up to 80% do. What to do about it? Well, some say waste is part of the American character. Others say that if Congress would loosen up the legal requirements as to what has to be in a school lunch, there would be less waste. Right now, every child up through junior high must be served a Type A lunch (2 ounches of meat or other protein, a half pint of milk, a slice of bread, and 3/4 of a cup of fruit or vegetable - all that whether they want it or not!) Since younger children do most of the dumping, some argue that they shouldn't be served all that unless they want it. Others say it's a question of attitude, and that education is the answer. Senator George McGovern, who chairs the Senate Nutrition Committee, has introduced a bill to pay for nutrition education in all schools, to be tied in with the lunch program. The theory is you've got to tell children why they should eat vegetables. Then there are those who say the food's getting thrown away because it's lousy food. A group of nutritionists and parents petitioned USDA a couple of weeks ago to do something about that. They took their 5,000 signatures to the new Assistant Secretary for Consumer Affairs - once herself a lobbyist for consumers - Carol Foreman.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOREMAN: It has taken a number of years to build the crud in the school lunch, and I've got to tell you it's going to take a little while to build it back out again. The only thing that I can promise you is a start in that direction.

ENSOR: Finally, there's always the debate in Washington about where the Child Nutrition Program should go from here. This year, and for many years now, Senator Humphrey has introduced a bill that would give every child in the nation a free school lunch. He says it would be cheaper to administer, and though expensive, could take advantage of the economies of scale. Senator Ribicoff has submitted a bill to separate education from HEW and put Child Nutrition under Education. Former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz always wanted to rid himself of the feeding and food stamp programs. We asked the new man, Bob Bergland, what he thinks.

SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE BERGLAND: As long as we have programs of this sort, I think the Department of Agriculture can run them as well as anybody and better than most.

ENSOR: But there is occasional talk of turning Child Nutrition into part of an income supplement program. It could always end up as part of the Carter Welfare Reform Package. Representative Holtzman says she thinks we should experiment with some sort of a voucher system - where needy families get food vouchers to spend on their kids, a little like the Food Stamp Program right now. Then school lunch programs would have to compete or go out of business. She says too often the government assumes poor parents, if given the choice, won't do what's best for their children.

BLAIR: My goodness, David, there really are a lot of controversies in this area.

ENSOR: That's right. The Congress gets pressure in varying directions on this from everybody from parents to superintendents and nutritionists and farmers and fruit wholesalers. One thing they all pretty much agree on, though, Wendy, the Child Nutrition Program should grow and prosper. A Type A lunch may mean something different next year than this year, but there will be more of them. And, Wendy, as we talk about scandals and plate waste, I think it's important to mention -- The programs do do a lot of good for a lot of children.

BLAIR: Thank you very much for your report. David Ensor with a report on the current controversies in Federal school food programs.

MERROW: Another prediction David Ensor didn't make, but I will, is that there will continue to be scandals in the food programs because they're big and lousely run with lots of money changing hands.

BLAIR: One listener has been sending us clippings about scandals in her home state of Iowa and we'd like to hear if there are similar problems in your area. OPTIONS IN EDUCATION went to the schools this week to see what the meals were really like there. Have you checked your school out lately? Maybe your child is one of the lucky ones who's getting good food, but maybe not. Let us know what you find out.

("STREETSONG" - Directed by Carl Orff, BASF - HC 25122)

MERROW: Benjamin Franklin High School Lunchroom is probably the most depressing - or one of the most depressing lunchrooms I've ever been in. It's huge - although it's not full of people. It's painted in the usual school colors of a pale green and a pale yellow and a pale pink. There's no acoustical tile. So, the slightest noise becomes overwhelming. When I walked in, there were a couple of kids smoking marijuana over in one corner, and outside in front of the school there were even more doing the same thing. What's interesting about this lunchroom is what it might become because there are people now who are working hard to try to change this set-up completely. One of the people who was involved in that coalition told me about their hopes for the future. They want to call it "The Energy Factory." Tell me something about what you hope it will be.

TEACHER: Well, we want to create an environment in which the students feel that they want to eat the food. That eating the food has to do with getting energy; that eating the food is basic to coming in school and learning and having a good experience. And the way we're going to do it is by letting them act as adults - instead of being confronted by the choice of the day, which, more often than not, is a bummer. We're going to let them express themselves everyday and pick from one of fourteen entrees, combined with Vitamin C-enriched french fries, and protein-enriched milk shakes, which is in excess of what the Federal government says a young student needs.

MERROW: Right now, most of the students are eligible for a free lunch here. This is a huge cafeteria, and there are only a couple of hundred kids here at most. Don't kids eat their free lunch?

TEACHER: That's astonishing. When I first saw the numbers, I was amazed. Out of approximately 1,000 children who are eligible for a free lunch, 400 eat the food. So, what does that mean? That means that 600 kids literally turn their backs on a free meal, and say, "Who needs this garbage?" That's extraordinary. It's the most dramatic vote of no confidence you'd ever want on a program.

MERROW: I just had lunch and it really wasn't all that bad.

TEACHER: No, I thought it was pretty good. I haven't had a Sloppy Joe like this in

a long time. It's better now than it used to be, but it's the scene that's a disaster. In fact, there's no choice. I mean, do you want no choice in your food? Do you want to come down and get what they give you? I don't. And I don't think these kids do. And the atmosphere is so degrading right now. It's such a bummer. I think they're so in the habit of not dealing with it.

MERROW: There's even a stigma attached to the eating here so that the kids who do eat here get made fun of by other kids.

TEACHER: That's right. They don't get the fun of tripping out and going outside. I used to feel that way when I was in high school. Maybe all kids feel that way. One of the ways we're going to address that problem is we're going to give them the food in bags. You want to take lunch and split? Fantastic. We're not going to force them to be in here. But what we're going to offer is better food than they can get on the outside. So, the chances are that they will come here.

MERROW: It sounds like you've picked the toughest school in the city to try this experiment in.

TEACHER: John, there are tougher schools in the city. But we came close.

MERROW: Is it going to cost more money to do it this way?

TEACHER: The start-up costs, generating a program like that, are significant. They'll be borne in 75% of the cases by the Federal money passed to the state. What we're doing is using that as seed capital, and we're going to say that increased revenues will pay it back in a five year period. If we prove it out, then we can go and do the rest of the system based on the now proven assumption that the money will come back.

MERROW: Is the food system losing money now?

TEACHER: The food system is a disaster now. It's funded by . . . it is budgeted at around $125 million - about $35 million in city tax levy funds are additionally needed to prop up the budget. In 1979, so says Mayor Beame, that $35 million item line is out. So, either the City of New York will have to radically cut back their services to the students, or the "Energy Factory" and such concepts will have to be proven. That's why everyone's receptive to it now.

MERROW: Let me ask you a question? I'll give you a few seconds to think about it. Suppose I were the principal and I came up to you both and said, "Well, I want you two guys to redesign the lunchroom. I want you both to figure out how you want this place to be, and you can do just about anything. You can move the walls around. You can change the ceiling. You can change the food." What would you do?

STUDENT: Paint this a nice color and everything. Some reasonable tables. Some nice food. Chicken, you know. Steak. Real hamburgers, and pork chops.

STUDENT: And real hamburgers, too!

STUDENT: And knock that cheap tuna fish, man. They swear they be giving tuna fish. They be giving chicken salad, man, and that ain't tuna fish.

STUDENT: That's not good.

MERROW: What else would you do? Here's an idea: How about giving you five or six choices everyday?

STUDENT: Hey, that would be . . I'd be enjoying that.

("FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD" From the Soundtrack of "OLIVER" - Music & Lyrics by Lionel Bart. Colgems - COSD-5501)

MACADERNY:

Parents know that the kids hate the lunches and breakfasts. The kids come home hungry. They say, "I threw it away, Ma." And what do the parents do about it? Nothing.

MAYER: What you may ask is -- What is the ethics of a society which will serve $6 to $7 dollar meals to by and large over-weight businessman traveling on airplanes, and then wants to serve meals which are worth 65¢ at the most to its children?

HOLTZMAN: We found food that was served in frozen state. We found food that was left out on the street for days. This very badly run program had victimized the children.

BLAIR: Material for this program came in part from Bill Toohey, NPR, New York, and David Ensor, here in Washington. If you'd like transcripts of this two-part series on "School Food," send $1.00 to National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036. Ask for Programs #75 & 76. The two cassettes are $10.00.

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I'm Wendy Blair. This is NPR -- National Public Radio.

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